

Colonial Census and the Making of ‘Indian Muslim Identity’ The Case of Punjab

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Abstract

This article examines the role of colonial censuses conducted in British India between 1871 and 1941 in the construction of Muslim identity, focusing on the Punjab case. It argues that the censuses were not merely instruments of demographic record keeping, but rather constituted a fundamental part of a knowledge regime that transformed flexible, overlapping forms of belonging into rigid, hierarchical, and standardized categories. In the Punjab context, caste affiliations, biradari networks, and sectarian divisions were reinterpreted through this colonial interpretive framework; rural-urban distinctions and tensions between zamindars and artisans intersected with census-based classifications in areas such as representation, education, employment, and military mobilization. Methodologically, the study relies on a close reading of the Punjab Census Reports between 1871 and 1941 and related administrative regulations; it traces their reflections in political demands, petitions submitted by Muslim community leaders and organizations, electoral practices, and struggles for representation, while also engaging in a comparative analysis with the literature of the history of religions. The findings reveal that census categories were not only externally imposed structures but also instruments strategically appropriated by local actors. For example, peasant communities highlighted their names in official records to obtain tax exemptions, Sufi sheikhs sought to have their disciples classified under separate sectarian categories, and merchant guilds made use of specific identity classifications to protect their economic interests. While Syed Ahmad Khan incorporated census data into a modernist program aimed at strengthening Muslims institutionally, politically, and educationally, Muhammad Iqbal, in his *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, articulated a dynamic vision of Islamic identity that transcended static classifications, nourished by the concepts of khudi and collective subjectivity. Iqbal’s approach inspired postcolonial Islamic politics to interpret identity not as an essentialist construct but as a field of consciousness and action that is constantly renewed. From the perspective of the history of religions, the censuses not only made visible the internal plurality of Islam (Sunnī, Shī‘ī, Ahl-i Hadis, Deobandī, Barelwī) but also reshaped boundary-making with Hindu and Sikh traditions. Building on this observation, this study argues that colonial censuses functioned not merely as administrative instruments but as key mechanisms of epistemic and political transformation, through which Muslim identity in Punjab was constructed.

Keywords

History of Religions, India, Punjab, Indian Muslim Identity, Hindu-Muslim Relations.

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Kolonyal Nüfus Sayımı ve ‘Hint Müslüman Kimliği’nin Oluşumu Pencap Örneği

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Öz

Bu makale, Britanya Hindistanı’nda 1871–1941 yılları arasında gerçekleştirilen kolonyal nüfus sayımlarının Müslüman kimliğin inşasındaki rolünü Pencap örneği üzerinden incelemektedir. Çalışma, nüfus sayımlarının yalnızca demografik kayıt tutma araçları olmadığını; aynı zamanda toplumsal aidiyetleri belirli kalıplara sokan, esnek ve iç içe geçmiş kimlik biçimlerini katı, hiyerarşik ve standart kategorilere dönüştüren bir bilgi rejiminin temel parçası olduğunu ileri sürmektedir. Pencap bağlamında kast aidiyetleri, biradari ağları ve mezhebi ayrışmalar bu sömürgeci yorumlama çerçevesi altında yeniden yorumlanmış; kırsal–kentsel ayrımlar ile zamindar–zanaatkâr gerilimleri temsil, eğitim, istihdam ve askerî seferberlik gibi alanlarda sayım kaynaklı sınıflandırmalarla kesişmiştir. Yöntemsel olarak çalışma, 1871–1941 arası Punjab Census Reports ve ilgili idari düzenlemelerin yakından okunmasına; bunların siyasal talepler, Müslüman toplum liderleri ve kuruluşları tarafından sunulan dilekçeler, seçim pratikleri ve temsil mücadelelerindeki yansımalarının izlenmesine; ayrıca dinler tarihi literatürüyle karşılaştırmalı bir analize dayanmaktadır. Bulgular, sayım kategorilerinin yalnızca dışarıdan dayatılan bir yapı değil, aynı zamanda yerel aktörler tarafından stratejik biçimde benimsenen araçlar olduğunu göstermektedir. Örneğin köylü toplulukları vergi muafiyetleri için kendi adlarını resmî kayıtlarda öne çıkarmış, tarikat şeyhleri mürid topluluklarını ayrı mezhep kategorileri altında tanımlatmaya çalışmış, tüccar loncaları ise ekonomik çıkarlarını korumak için özel kimlik sınıflandırmalarına başvurmuştur. Seyyid Ahmed Han, sayım verilerini Müslümanların kurumsal, siyasal ve eğitsel güçlenmesi için modernist bir programa eklerken; Muhammed İkbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* adlı eserinde durağan sınıflandırmaları aşan, khudi ve kolektif özne kavramlarıyla beslenen dinamik bir İslami kimlik vizyonu ortaya koymuştur. İkbal’in bu yaklaşımı, sömürge sonrası İslami siyasette kimliğin özcü kalıplar yerine sürekli yenilenen bir bilinç ve eylem alanı olarak yorumlanmasına ilham vermiştir. Dinler tarihi açısından bakıldığında, sayımlar yalnızca İslam içindeki çoğulluğu (Sünnî, Şîî, Ehl-i Hadis, Diyûbandî, Berelvî) görünür kılmamış; aynı zamanda Hindu ve Sih gelenekleriyle sınır çizimlerini de yeniden şekillendirmiştir. Bu gözlemden yola çıkarak bu çalışmada, kolonyal sayımların idari bir enstrüman olmanın ötesinde epistemik ve siyasal dönüşümün anahtar mekanizması olduğunu; Pencap’ta Müslüman kimliğin bu çerçevede kurgulandığını savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Dinler Tarihi, Hindistan, Pencap, Hint Müslüman Kimliği, Hindu Müslüman ilişkileri.

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Introduction

Modern censuses conducted in British India served not merely as tools for the empirical registration of demographic facts, but as critical instruments in the construction and consolidation of colonial authority through the apparatus of knowledge production. Far from being neutral or descriptive exercises, these censuses—particularly from the 1871 decennial enumeration onwards—emerged as ritualized performances of state power, systematically translating the diverse, fluid, and overlapping social realities of Indian communities into rigid, quantifiable categories. In doing so, they played a constitutive role in shaping how colonized populations, especially Muslims, were imagined, governed, and ultimately interpellated as distinct administrative subjects. The Muslim identity, previously embedded in localized, syncretic, and heterogeneous social forms, was increasingly abstracted and homogenized through classificatory mechanisms such as religious affiliation, caste subdivisions, language use, and sectarian orientation. The logic of enumeration, therefore, not only reinforced colonial distinctions between Hindus, Muslims, and others, but also reified such categories in ways that would later become foundational for communal political movements. The census thus functioned as a discursive technology of governance, converting dynamic religious subjectivities into fixed, state-legible identities and thereby prefiguring the communal categories that would come to dominate late colonial and post-colonial politics.

Viewed through the theoretical perspective of Michel Foucault’s analysis of power and knowledge, censuses emerge as epistemological strategies through which the modern state renders its population legible, rational, and administrable.¹ In colonial India, this strategy did not simply stabilize or describe preexisting forms of identity but actively configured the category of the “Muslim” as an intelligible and measurable object. As Bernard S. Cohn argued under the concept of the “colonization of knowledge,” the colonial state deployed information not only as a tool of governance but also as a means of transformation.² This transformative process involved not only numerical classification but also the discursive reconstruction of identities.

Scholarly engagement with the relationship between colonial censuses and identity formation in India has grown substantially over the past few decades. Nicholas B. Dirks emphasized that the British colonial state relied heavily on codification and classification to impose administrative order, thereby transforming Indian society through knowledge practices.³ Partha Chatterjee underscored how colonial categories shaped not only governance but also the political imagination of the colonized.⁴ Sudipta Kaviraj analyzed the epistemologic violence embedded in colonial classification schemes and their long-

1 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 99-101.

2 Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 4.

3 Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001).

4 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).

term impact on postcolonial identity politics.⁵ Similarly, Sandria Freitag illustrated how communal categories such as 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' were sharpened and institutionalized through colonial legal and bureaucratic frameworks.⁶ C.A. Bayly further contended that social knowledge produced via gazetteers and ethnographic surveys laid the groundwork for communal segmentation.⁷ Further contributions by Gyanendra Pandey and the Subaltern Studies collective have shown how colonial classifications elided local complexities and popular subjectivities, particularly in the construction of communal narratives.⁸ William R. Pinch extended this line of inquiry by examining how military recruitment and caste played into the reification of religious identities.⁹ Recent work by Rohit Bhagat has also revisited the political stakes of census categorization, emphasizing how administrative imperatives shaped the very ontologies of caste and religion.¹⁰ Ethnographic projects such as Watson and Kaye's *The People of India*¹¹ and Risley's anthropometric surveys¹² demonstrate how textual, visual, and bodily data combined to reinforce hierarchical colonial orderings.¹³

Methodologically, this study adopts a microhistorical approach centered on Punjab, drawing on the Punjab Census Reports from 1871 to 1941, related colonial administrative regulations, petitions submitted by Muslim community leaders and organizations, and vernacular Muslim writings. Rather than treating censuses as neutral statistical exercises, the analysis engages with them as discursive practices, applying tools from discourse analysis and intellectual history to uncover how classificatory regimes both reflected and reconfigured social realities. This interdisciplinary framework—combining archival research, the history of religions, and political theory—allows for an examination of how colonial enumeration intersected with intra-Muslim differentiations and how local actors strategically appropriated these categories in legal claims, petitions, and communal debates.

This study contributes to the existing literature not only by shifting focus from pan-Indian generalizations to the socio-religious specificity of Punjab, but also by adopting a microhistorical approach grounded in archival census data, colonial reports, and vernacular Muslim writings. Punjab's pronounced sectarian plurality and caste-inflected social hierarchies rendered it a key site for the entrenchment of colonial classificatory regimes. Unlike studies that primarily explore administrative policy or epistemologies of state knowledge,

5 Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

6 Sandria B. Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; Oxford: University of California Press, 1989).

7 Christopher Alan Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

8 Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

9 William R. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

10 Ram B. Bhagat, "Census, Politics and the Construction of Identities in India", *The Global Politics of Census Taking*, ed. Walter Bartl et al. (London: Routledge, 2024).

11 John Forbes Watson - Sir John William Kaye (eds), *The People of India: A Series of Photographic Illustrations, with Descriptive Letterpress, of the Races and Tribes of Hindustan, Originally Prepared Under the Authority of the Government of India, and Reproduced by Order of the Secretary of State for India in Council* (London: India Museum, 1875).

12 Sir Herbert Hope Risley, *The People of India* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Company, 1915).

13 Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Risley, *The People of India*, 14.

this research investigates how enumeration practices intersected with intra-Muslim differentiations—such as the distinctions among Sunnī, Shī'ism, Ahl-i Ḥadīth, Deobandī, and others—and how these divisions were not only externally imposed but gradually internalized. Through attention to how colonial categories were appropriated in the writings and public engagements of Muslim intellectuals such as Syed Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Iqbal, the study further reveals how statistical representation and political theology converged in shaping Muslim communal consciousness.

1. Colonial Governance and Knowledge Production

One of the central instruments of British colonial governance in India was the development of elaborate systems of knowledge through which native populations could be rendered legible, categorized, and ultimately controlled. These knowledge regimes were not merely descriptive enterprises designed to record empirical realities; rather, they were constitutive of the very social and political categories they purported to document. As Michel Foucault observes in his lectures on modern biopolitics, the state's interest in "population" is inseparable from its broader will to order and regulate life through epistemic control.¹⁴ In the colonial context, knowledge was a tool of conquest no less potent than military force. The classification of castes, tribes, and religious communities into rigid and measurable categories was part of a broader project of administrative legibility that made governance both conceivable and enforceable.

British administrators in India approached society through what Bernard S. Cohn called "investigative modalities"—cultural, textual, and numerical techniques that transformed India's heterogeneity into fixed, intelligible frameworks.¹⁵ These included the census, land surveys, ethnographic mapping, and legal codification. Each of these modalities contributed to a colonial episteme that actively produced the very realities it claimed to observe. The decennial census, introduced systematically from 1871 onward, became one of the most powerful instruments in this process. According to Cohn, the census was not merely a mechanism for demographic calculation but a performative act that inscribed colonial categories onto the Indian social landscape. By counting, classifying, and naming, the state imposed an official vision of society that overrode vernacular forms of identity, kinship, and belief.¹⁶

Within this classificatory framework, Islam became an especially focal object of colonial scrutiny. Muslims, due to their historic association with political power under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, were perceived as politically suspect and potentially rebellious. Consequently, the British applied increasingly refined methods to enumerate and differentiate Muslim populations. The 1881 and 1891 censuses not only documented the total Muslim population but also disaggregated them according to sect (e.g., Sunnī, Shī'ism), Sufi orders (e.g., Qādirī, Naqshbandī), and linguistic affiliations (e.g., Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali), thereby generating a grid of theological and cultural distinctions.¹⁷

14 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 99–102.

15 Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 6.

16 Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 11.

17 Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "The Colonial State and Statistical Knowledge", *History of Science, Philosophy*

These distinctions were not innocuous; they formed the basis of bureaucratic practice and shaped state policy in education, employment, and political representation. A key feature of this classificatory regime was its tendency to freeze otherwise fluid social identities into rigid, hierarchical categories. This was particularly consequential in the case of Islam, where multiple layers of belonging—ritual, doctrinal, regional—often overlapped in practice. Yet colonial administrators insisted on mapping this multiplicity into discrete units. Nicholas Dirks powerfully captured this phenomenon when he argued that “colonial rule needed to say what India was before it could rule it.”¹⁸ In other words, colonial governance was predicated not on representing social reality, but on reconstructing it in ways that made it amenable to surveillance and control. This reconstructive project was informed by Orientalist assumptions and Eurocentric taxonomies. Colonial officials such as John Strachey depicted Indian religious groups as inherently antagonistic, framing Hindus and Muslims as natural enemies incapable of coexistence.¹⁹ Such representations served to justify colonial interventions as a form of neutral arbitration. The census, under this view, became an ostensibly scientific tool that simultaneously measured and manufactured social divisions. Its categories were not value-free; they were saturated with political assumptions that shaped both colonial rule and indigenous responses.

Indeed, the census helped produce what can be called an “epistemic infrastructure” for communalism in South Asia. By aligning numerical strength with political claims, and by rendering sectarian difference visible and calculable, the colonial state laid the groundwork for the communal tensions that would intensify in the late colonial and postcolonial periods. Muslims, in particular, were transformed from a diverse set of regional communities into a singular, bounded population that could be counted, managed, and—ultimately—partitioned. Thus, population censuses in British India were not merely technical exercises in statecraft. They were deeply political acts that redefined the parameters of identity, difference, and belonging. Enumeration became an ontological event: it declared not just how many people there were, but what kinds of people they were, and how they ought to relate to one another within a state-sanctioned order. The long-term effects of these interventions are still visible in contemporary South Asian politics, where the legacy of colonial classification continues to shape debates over representation, community, and national identity.²⁰

2. The Censuses of British India (1871–1941)

Each census iteration built upon and intensified this classificatory regime, organizing the subcontinent’s heterogeneous population into rigid, bureaucratically intelligible groups. Through such classifications, colonial authorities transformed fluid, context-specific identities into fixed communal and caste-based markers. This process was particularly pronounced in Punjab, where deep sectarian diversity—Sunni, Shi‘ism, Ahl-i Ḥadith, Deobandī—interacted with complex caste stratifications, including Ashraf, Ajlaf, and occupationally defined groups. The 1881 and 1891 censuses, for example, disaggregated Muslim

and *Culture in Indian Civilization*, ed. D.P. Chattopadhyaya (Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2001), IX/112–114.

18 Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 43.

19 Sir John Strachey, *India: Its Administration & Progress* (London: Macmillan, 1903), 19.

20 Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, 4–6; see also Dirks, *Castes of Mind*.

populations along both sectarian and caste lines, affecting access to political representation, educational opportunities, and government employment.²¹ These classifications were not merely descriptive: they actively shaped bureaucratic procedures, electoral rolls, and land revenue assessments, embedding colonial assumptions about hierarchy and social order into the everyday administration of Punjab.

As Nicholas Dirks notes, colonial interventions did not merely record these distinctions; they helped produce and institutionalize them, contributing to the ossification of social boundaries. Consequently, census practices laid the groundwork for future communal contestations and the politicization of religious and caste identities. Importantly, this process was not merely top-down: emerging Muslim reformist and political discourses—such as the Aligarh Movement, Deobandī educational initiatives, and local zamindar-led associations—began to engage with, contest, or internalize the classificatory language introduced by the colonial census. In some cases, Muslim leaders strategically invoked these categories to consolidate authority, negotiate representation in legislative councils, and mobilize communities for reformist or electoral purposes, demonstrating a complex interplay between colonial imposition and indigenous agency.²²

Moreover, the census's impact extended beyond formal politics into social and cultural spheres. By codifying sectarian and caste differences, the colonial state encouraged the production of textual and organizational resources—community registers, madrasa networks, and reformist pamphlets—that reinforced these distinctions. Over time, these state-mediated classifications became embedded in collective memory, shaping patterns of social interaction, marriage practices, and local leadership structures. In Punjab, the interplay between colonial classification and Muslim reformist engagement thus contributed to the emergence of a politically conscious and socially differentiated Muslim public, illustrating how bureaucratic techniques could produce lasting social and political consequences.²³

2.1. The 1871 Census: An Experimental Beginning

The 1871 census, the first attempt at an all-India demographic enumeration, marked the embryonic phase of colonial efforts to rationalize Indian society through quantification. Although ambitious in scope, the census remained crude in both methodology and conceptual framing. Muslims, for instance, were lumped under the all-encompassing label “Muhammadans,” without any effort to record sectarian affiliations, caste distinctions, or regional differences. As noted in the *Punjab Report*, “no significant attempt was made to disaggregate Muslims into meaningful social or theological subgroups”.²⁴ This homogenization was justified on grounds of administrative simplicity, yet it betrayed deeper colonial assumptions about Islam as a monolithic religious formation. Scholars like David Ludden argue that such early censuses reflect a broader orientalist tendency to treat Indian society through a lens of abstraction and essentialism.²⁵ Moreover, the census failed to account for

21 Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 45.

22 Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 112–115.

23 Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 50–53.

24 *Census of India, 1871: Punjab Report* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1872), 45.

25 David Ludden, “Orientalist Empiricism and Transformations of Colonial Knowledge”, *Orientalism and The*

socio-economic hierarchies within Muslim communities—such as the distinction between Sayyids and occupational groups like butchers (qasai) and weavers (julaha)—that had real implications for power and prestige. In retrospect, this erasure established a foundational pattern that subsequent censuses would build upon: the substitution of administrative order for ethnographic complexity.

Despite these limitations, the 1871 census set a precedent in the colonial logic of demographic governance. It introduced the idea that religious identity could be stabilized through statistical enumeration, an idea that would grow in sophistication and political consequence over the next seven decades. Though rudimentary, this initial effort revealed the British state's commitment to translating cultural plurality into bureaucratic legibility—a theme that would define the trajectory of colonial census-making in India.

2.2. The 1881 and 1891 Censuses: Systematization and Subdivision

The censuses of 1881 and 1891 marked a decisive turning point in British India's classificatory strategies. Moving beyond the experimental and tentative approaches of 1871, these subsequent enumerations embodied a drive toward heightened systematization, bureaucratic precision, and increased granularity. The colonial state now sought not merely to count but to explain, classify, and hierarchize its subjects, invoking the authority of supposedly scientific principles drawn from Western ethnology, comparative philology, anthropology, and the emerging discipline of religious studies.²⁶ This epistemic shift revealed the extent to which the census became entangled with wider orientalist projects of knowledge production, embedding colonial assumptions about race, religion, and caste into the very categories through which Indian society was administratively known and politically managed. One of the defining features of these censuses was the intensification of communal subdivision, especially within Islam. In Punjab, Muslims were now increasingly sorted not just by broad religious identity but also by sect, caste, occupation, theological orientation, and even patterns of ritual practice. The 1891 census made explicit reference to intra-Muslim groupings such as Shi'ism, Sunnī, Ahl-i Ḥadīth, and Faraizi²⁷ and in some districts even recorded distinctions between reformist strands like Deobandī and Barelvi orientations.²⁸ This growing bureaucratic fixation reflected the British state's preoccupation with identifying, categorizing, and ultimately managing "internal difference" within seemingly unified religious communities. By translating fluid theological and social affiliations into fixed statistical entities, the census created durable categories that would shape both colonial policy and the trajectory of Muslim identity politics in Punjab.²⁹

Scholars such as Sandria Freitag and Peter van der Veer have argued that during this pe-

Post-Colonial Predicament, ed. C.A. Breckenridge - Peter Van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 250–252.

26 Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 112–115; Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, 81.

27 *Census of India, 1891: Punjab Report* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1892), 113–117.

28 Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 103.

29 Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860–1923* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 79.

riod, “communalism as a state effect” emerged, referring to the codification of social difference as a function of colonial administrative logic.³⁰ These censuses did not merely reflect existing identities but actively reinforced and sometimes even generated new distinctions. For instance, occupational titles like butchers (qasai), barbers (nai), and weavers (julaha) were increasingly treated as caste markers with putative religious overtones, producing new hierarchies within Muslim society.³¹ This tendency was not confined to occupational groups alone: census officials also tied linguistic and regional attributes—such as Punjabi versus Urdu speakers or rural versus urban communities—to religious differentiation, thus embedding socio-economic distinctions into communal categories.³² By conflating professional, linguistic, and ritual distinctions under the banner of religious identity, the colonial census contributed to a sedimented taxonomy of difference that would later inform political mobilizations and communalist discourse.³³ Moreover, the colonial obsession with classifying Muslim subgroups was shaped not only by administrative but also by political and military considerations.

The British sought to identify so-called “martial races” for recruitment, which led to the valorization of certain Muslim castes such as Rajputs and Pathans while marginalizing artisan and occupational groups. This process intersected with revenue policies and local patronage networks, further entrenching disparities in status and access to state resources.³⁴ As Gyanendra Pandey has shown, such practices reinforced stereotypes that linked caste, religion, and character into an integrated typology of colonial governance.³⁵ David Omissi’s work on the Indian Army similarly demonstrates how census classifications were mapped directly onto recruitment practices, thereby militarizing social categories.³⁶ Thus, the censuses of 1881 and 1891 did not simply document social divisions; they materially participated in the colonial construction and institutionalization of difference, producing hierarchies that shaped both administrative control and indigenous perceptions of communal identity.

This stage of census development illustrates a substantial deepening in both the epistemic reach and the political utility of colonial knowledge. Whereas the 1871 census merely gestured toward a simplified vision of religious uniformity, the censuses of 1881 and 1891 actively institutionalized intra-communal fragmentation, embedding sectarian, caste, occupational, and linguistic distinctions into bureaucratic categories. These moves not only stabilized new hierarchies within Muslim society but also aligned classificatory practices with wider strategies of governance, such as revenue assessment, recruitment policies, and the regulation of public rituals. By the end of the nineteenth century, census-making had become a crucial mechanism through which colonial power both observed and recon-

30 Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, 36; Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley; Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994), 15.

31 Ayesha Jalal, *Self And Sovereignty: Individual And Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 19.

32 Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, 120.

33 Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, 19; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 52.

34 Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, 62.

35 Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, 13.

36 David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 42.

figured indigenous social realities, setting the stage for even more intricate engagements between bureaucracy and local identities in the twentieth century.

2.3. The 1901 Census: Religious Reification and Administrative Intrusion

The 1901 census is often regarded as the most consequential moment in the colonial project of classification. Conducted under the supervision of Herbert Risley, it was marked by the explicit attempt to ground social stratification in pseudo-scientific racial theories and in a more rigid definition of religion. Risley's assertion that caste was fundamentally linked to racial origin gave the census an explicitly racialized framework.³⁷ In Punjab, this meant that Muslim groups were increasingly mapped not only through sectarian and occupational lines but also through supposed ethnological and somatic markers. For instance, Sayyids and Pathans were valorized as possessing "superior racial stock" while occupational castes such as weavers and barbers were relegated to lower categories of both social and biological value.³⁸

This census also witnessed the deepening of sectarian subdivision within Islam. Separate entries for Sunnīs, Shī'isms, Ahmādīs, Ahl-i Ḥadīth, and Barelvis appeared in certain provincial reports, thereby transforming theological distinctions into rigid statistical categories. Barbara Metcalf has shown how the colonial recognition of reformist groups like the Deobandīs and Barelvis lent them unintended institutional coherence and visibility, embedding their debates into official records.³⁹ By fixing ephemeral theological disputes into the census schema, the state effectively reified internal contestations within Indian Islam, producing durable categories that reformers themselves were compelled to adopt in later political discourse.

Crucially, the 1901 census reflected a broader epistemic ambition: to measure religion as a totalizing category that could encompass ritual practice, theological orientation, and even patterns of dietary restriction. As Gyan Prakash has argued, this marked the colonial transformation of religion into an all-encompassing grid of governance.⁴⁰ In Punjab, the impact was particularly acute, as overlapping identities based on biradari (local kinship-based or caste-like communities) and local affiliations were increasingly overshadowed by census-driven communal designations. This administrative intrusion set the stage for the politicization of religious identity in the decades to follow, foreshadowing the communal mobilizations of the early twentieth century.

2.4. The 1911–1941 Censuses: From Enumeration to Political Instrument

The period from 1911 to 1941 marked the culmination of colonial census practices, transforming them from descriptive exercises into overtly political instruments. The 1911 census carried forward the classificatory logics of its predecessors, but now with heightened precision in the documentation of sectarian and caste distinctions among Muslims. In Punjab, census officials recorded not only sectarian categories but also the numerical

37 Risley, *The People of India*, 68–71.

38 *Census of India, 1901: Punjab Report* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1902), 134–137.

39 Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 115.

40 Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32/2 (April 1990), 401.

strength of occupational biradaris (local kinship-based or caste-like communities), thereby linking religious identity directly to socio-economic hierarchies.⁴¹

By the 1921 census, the practice of aligning demographic data with communal representation in legislatures was firmly entrenched. As C. A. Bayly notes, this development crystallized the link between enumeration and political entitlement, institutionalizing the notion that community strength was measurable through numbers.⁴² In Punjab, where Muslims constituted a majority, the census became a critical resource in debates over legislative quotas, revenue distribution, and access to state employment. This was especially visible in the contestations between urban Ashraf groups, rural zamindars, and artisan castes, all of whom sought to leverage census data to strengthen their political claims.⁴³

The 1931 census further intensified these dynamics by offering detailed accounts of sectarian subdivisions, including the recognition of Ahmadiyya communities as distinct from other Muslims. This act, as Yohanan Friedmann has argued, not only codified theological disputes but also laid the groundwork for later political exclusions.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, the 1941 census—conducted under the shadow of World War II and mounting nationalist tensions—was marked by both administrative limitations and heightened political stakes. As Ian Catanach observes, the communal categories stabilized by decades of census-making now became the lingua franca of nationalist and communalist mobilization, particularly in Punjab.⁴⁵

Thus, by the eve of independence, the census had fully transcended its original statistical rationale. It had become an indispensable political instrument, shaping the very grammar of representation, entitlement, and exclusion. In Punjab, the cumulative effect of seventy years of enumeration was the crystallization of a communalized Muslim identity—an identity produced not only by indigenous reformers and political actors but also by the classificatory regimes of the colonial state. For instance, the 1881 census first attempted to disaggregate Muslim populations by sect and language, while the 1891 and 1901 censuses introduced finer subdivisions, including occupational biradaris and Sufi affiliations, which increasingly became markers of social status and political influence. By the 1921 and 1931 censuses, these classifications were highly institutionalized, shaping voter rolls, legislative council representation, and debates over reserved quotas in education and employment. This longitudinal perspective demonstrates that the construction of Muslim identity in Punjab was not a singular event but a cumulative process, incrementally reinforced through successive census iterations. Ultimately, the colonial census functioned both as a mirror reflecting social realities and as a tool actively producing them, leaving a legacy that continued to influence communal politics and debates over identity well into the post-independence period.

41 *Census of India, 1911: Punjab Report* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1912), 221–224.

42 Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, 131.

43 Jalal, *Self And Sovereignty*, 55.

44 Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 97.

45 Ian J. Catanach, *Rural Credit in Western India 1875–1930 Rural Credit and the Co-Operative Movement in the Bombay Presidency* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 215.

3. The Construction of Identity in the Punjab Context

The Punjab case offers a crucial vantage point for examining how colonial census categories did not merely record pre-existing identities but actively reshaped and institutionalized them within a colonial epistemology of governance. Unlike other provinces, Punjab combined a Muslim demographic majority with immense internal diversity—sectarian, caste-based, occupational, and regional—which rendered it a laboratory for the colonial classificatory project. The census thus functioned simultaneously as a mirror and a mold: it reflected local complexities while crystallizing them into rigid, state-sanctioned categories that often reified fluid and situational affiliations. Scholars such as Gilmartin⁴⁶, Talbot⁴⁷, Barrier⁴⁸, and Jones⁴⁹ have emphasized that Punjab's socio-political fabric, dominated by biradari (kinship) networks, Sufi affiliations, and agrarian hierarchies, became increasingly refracted through the classificatory logic of the colonial state. This process went beyond mere description, embedding administrative taxonomies into everyday negotiations of identity. What emerged was a dual and dialectical process: the fixation of identities through bureaucratic enumeration, and their subsequent mobilization in petitions, electoral demands, reformist debates, and wider intellectual discourses that both accepted and contested the colonial framework.

3.1. Census Categories and Punjab's Socio-Religious Landscape

In Punjab, the census interacted with highly localized systems of belonging, particularly the biradari networks that structured social and economic life. Biradari affiliation often trumped sectarian or even caste considerations in everyday practice; however, through census enumeration, these affiliations were reframed under religious and caste labels. For example, agricultural castes such as Jats, Rajputs, and Arains were categorized not only by occupational status but also by their sectarian adherence, producing a new fusion of socio-economic and religious identity.⁵⁰ This process was further complicated by urban-rural divides: while urban elites (Ashraf) often emphasized genealogical and sectarian distinctions, rural communities were more grounded in kinship solidarity and agrarian concerns. The census thus imposed a homogenizing framework on what were, in reality, layered and situational identities.

The colonial emphasis on sectarian differentiation also had enduring implications that extended beyond theology into social and political life. Groups such as the Ahl-i Ḥadīth, Deobandīs, and Bareilvis—originally delineated through theological controversies—were granted formal census recognition, thereby transforming them into statistically measurable and politically legible communities.⁵¹ In Punjab, these sectarian categories intersected with caste, biradari, and occupational distinctions, producing hybridized identities: for in-

46 David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 45–49.

47 Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1988), 110–114.

48 Norman Gerald Barrier, *The Census in British India: New Perspectives* (Delhi: Manohar, 1981), 180–184.

49 Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 92–96.

50 Barrier, *The Census in British India*, 189.

51 Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, 117.

stance, a Deobandî artisan or a Bareilvi zamindar embodied layered census-inflected identities that were simultaneously religious, socio-economic, and kinship-based. As Freitag demonstrates, such codifications facilitated novel forms of political mobilization, where census figures became the basis for petitions, court cases, and electoral claims.⁵² Similarly, Barrier⁵³ and Jones⁵⁴ note that census data endowed ephemeral theological debates with bureaucratic permanence, compelling reformist and revivalist groups to engage with these state-imposed categories in redefining their self-understanding and strategies of communal representation.

3.2. Rural Power Structures and the Census Logic

The entrenchment of census categories was particularly visible in Punjab's rural power dynamics, where the colonial administration relied heavily on rural notables—zamindars, pirs, and influential tribal leaders—to mediate governance. Census classifications provided these elites with numerical legitimacy, reinforcing their claims to land, revenue rights, and political representation. For instance, the enumeration of Muslim agricultural castes such as Jats and Rajputs as dominant groups validated their privileged access to land rights and strengthened their bargaining power in provincial politics.⁵⁵ By contrast, artisan and service castes, relegated to lower census categories, experienced the erosion of their social capital, as statistical enumeration formalized their marginalization. The census thus codified existing inequalities into enduring structures, embedding them into the logic of colonial governance and rural patronage networks.

The intersection of census logic with rural patronage networks thus intensified social stratification and reshaped Punjab's agrarian order in more complex ways. Census figures were not only mobilized in negotiating revenue settlements and electoral quotas but also in securing access to the vast irrigation schemes under the canal colonies, where statistical proof of communal strength determined land allotments and water rights. Talbot and Ali argue that this process redefined Punjab's political economy, embedding colonial knowledge-production directly into the very infrastructure of agrarian power.⁵⁶ As Imran Ali demonstrates in his study of canal colonization, census categories structured who benefited from irrigation expansion, thereby fusing bureaucratic classification with material redistribution.⁵⁷ The census was therefore not merely descriptive but constitutive of new hierarchies, amplifying the authority of rural elites while constraining the agency of subordinate groups. This restructuring reinforced the dominance of zamindars (landowning elites), pirs (religious elders or Sufi mystics, dervishes), and landed magnates, while simultaneously deepening the socio-economic vulnerability of artisans, peasants, and landless laborers, who found themselves numerically defined into marginal positions within a state-engineered agrarian hierarchy.

52 Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, 225.

53 Barrier, *The Census in British India*, 194.

54 Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, 103.

55 Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, 102–105; Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947*, 136–138.

56 Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849-1947*, 135–138; Imran Ali, *The Punjab Under Imperialism, 1885-1947* (Princeton University Press, 1988), 76–79.

57 Ali, *The Punjab Under Imperialism, 1885-1947*, 58.

3.3. Urban Elites, Reform Movements, and Communal Mobilization

In urban Punjab, the census provided a distinct form of political currency, particularly in cities such as Lahore and Amritsar where Muslim elites sought to assert cultural and political pre-eminence. Ashraf elites strategically deployed census figures to substantiate claims of Muslim majority status and to argue for privileged access to provincial institutions, patronage, and municipal offices. Reformist associations such as the Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam not only mobilized census data to demand enhanced educational and employment opportunities but also to underscore the link between demographic strength and state recognition of communal rights.⁵⁸ The census simultaneously became a stage for institutionalizing sectarian debates: reformist and revivalist leaders across Sunnī–Shī‘ism, Deobandī–Barelvi, and Ahl-i Ḥadīth spectrums drew on census categories to substantiate the legitimacy of their followings, effectively transforming theological controversies into quantifiable political identities. As Freitag⁵⁹ and Gilmartin⁶⁰ highlight, this process fused religious contestations with bureaucratic enumeration, embedding rivalries within the political framework of colonial Punjab.

The politicization of census numbers reached its height during the 1920s and 1930s, when constitutional reforms linked legislative representation and communal quotas directly to demographic size. As Freitag emphasizes, census categories became the grammar of communal politics, supplying elites with a statistical vocabulary for entitlement, exclusion, and claims to political space.⁶¹ In Punjab, where Muslims constituted a majority, this dynamic generated not only Hindu–Muslim rivalries but also sharpened intra-Muslim fissures, especially between rural landed magnates and urban professional classes. For example, zamindar associations invoked census figures to secure agricultural representation in the Punjab Legislative Council, while urban reformist groups such as the Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam mobilized the same data to argue for Muslim access to education and bureaucratic positions.⁶² The census thus functioned as both an arbiter and an instrument of power, embedding colonial classifications into Punjab’s political life and ensuring that communal mobilization increasingly took the form of numerical competition.

3.4. Intellectual Engagements with Census Categories and Muslim Thought in Punjab

The intellectual engagement with census-driven identity construction in Punjab was profound and multifaceted. Syed Ahmad Khan, though writing earlier, provided conceptual frameworks for interpreting Muslim “backwardness” that census results seemed to empirically confirm. His emphasis on rational reform, modern education, and the distinctiveness of the Muslim community resonated strongly with Punjabi debates on ashraf versus ajlaf, supplying elite groups with a vocabulary for framing social and economic disparities.⁶³ In the Punjabi context, Khan’s writings were not only cited but strategically appropriated by

58 Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, 90; Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*, 108.

59 Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, 231.

60 Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, 115.

61 Freitag, *Collective Action and Community*, 232.

62 Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj, 1849–1947*, 144; Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam*, 123.

63 Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed, and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (London: Trübner & Company, 1869), 45–47; David Lelyveld, *Aligarh’s First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 88–90; Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 112–115.

reformist associations such as the Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam and other educational bodies, who mobilized his ideas to argue for Muslim advancement vis-à-vis both Hindus and internal Muslim caste divisions. This appropriation was visible in debates around access to colonial education and employment, where Khan's call for modernist reform was invoked to justify demands for institutional support and communal quotas.⁶⁴

By contrast, Muhammad Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* offered not only a philosophical response but also a profound critique of colonial epistemology that sought to transcend census-driven reductionism.⁶⁵ Iqbal denounced the bureaucratic fixation on static, quantifiable categories, describing such enumeration as inimical to the creative unfolding of Muslim spiritual life, and instead advanced a dynamic conception of identity grounded in *khudi* (selfhood), moral agency, and collective spiritual autonomy.⁶⁶ As Qureshi⁶⁷, Malik⁶⁸, and Schimmel⁶⁹ note, Iqbal's interventions displaced discourse from numerical entitlement toward ethical, metaphysical, and poetic dimensions of community, thereby undermining the epistemic authority of colonial enumeration. His vision of Muslim identity, articulated through the language of vitality, creativity, and spiritual sovereignty, offered an alternative grammar of belonging that challenged both the reductive logic of the census and the political instrumentalization of numbers in colonial Punjab.

These intellectual responses -including the Aligarh reformers' advocacy for modern education, the Deobandi scholars' critiques of sectarian codifications, and petitions by local zamindars and Muslim associations for political representation- illustrate how census categories were not only internalized but also subjected to sustained critique and reinterpretation. Punjabi Muslim thinkers engaged in a dialectical process in which colonial statistics provided the structural language for petitions, electoral claims, and legal disputes, yet reformist and philosophical voices—drawing on modernist, theological, and poetic traditions—resisted their determinism. In doing so, they generated layered, often conflicting, visions of community and identity formation that reveal Punjab as a site where colonial epistemologies were both appropriated and destabilized, rather than passively absorbed.

Conclusion

The colonial censuses conducted in British India between 1871 and 1941 were not merely bureaucratic exercises in demographic enumeration but powerful epistemic instruments that profoundly reshaped social and religious life. The Punjab case demonstrates that the census was a decisive mechanism through which flexible, plural, and overlapping affilia-

64 Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 147; Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, 89.

65 Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 75–79.

66 Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, 79; Bashir Ahmad Dar, *Iqbal: Poet-Philosopher of Pakistan* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1983), 146.

67 Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *Ulema in Politics: A Study Relating to the Political Activities of the Ulema in the South-Asian Subcontinent from 1556 to 1947* (Karachi: Ma'aref, 1974), 122.

68 Hafeez Malik, *Iqbal: Poet-Philosopher of Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 201.

69 Annemarie Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing: A Study Into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 312.

tions were translated into rigid and hierarchical classifications. Caste, biradari, and sectarian distinctions—once fluid and context-dependent—were bureaucratically fixed into measurable categories, generating new forms of social inequality. These classifications not only redefined rural–urban relations and zamindar–artisan hierarchies but also directly influenced patterns of education, employment, and military recruitment. Thus, the census functioned as a regime of knowledge and power that ordered everyday life through administrative techniques of visibility and regulation. Yet, this system was not simply imposed from above; it was appropriated, negotiated, and reinterpreted by local actors who used census categories to articulate new forms of political and communal identity.

The intellectual responses of Muslim thinkers reveal how deeply this epistemic order permeated colonial Muslim consciousness. Syed Ahmad Khan's modernist appropriation of census data as a diagnostic tool for Muslim regeneration contrasted with Muhammad Iqbal's philosophical vision of identity as a dynamic, creative, and moral project transcending colonial categories. Their differing engagements illustrate that Muslim intellectual discourse was not a passive reflection of colonial knowledge but an active site of contestation where identity was reimagined beyond the parameters of state classification. From the perspective of the history of religions, the census reshaped Islam's internal plurality (Sunnī, Shīʿī, Ahl-i Ḥadīth, Deobandī, Barelvī) and reconstituted its relational boundaries with Hindu and Sikh traditions, thus transforming religion from a lived and local experience into a state-legible object of governance.

Building upon these findings, future research should investigate how the classificatory legacies of colonial censuses continue to structure identity formation and state policy in postcolonial South Asia. Comparative analysis between Punjab and other regions—such as Bengal, the United Provinces, and the North-West Frontier—could reveal divergent trajectories in how census-based hierarchies were either perpetuated or reconfigured after independence. A micro historical approach that incorporates oral histories, vernacular press archives, and local administrative records could uncover how individuals and communities experienced, contested, or appropriated census categories in everyday contexts. Moreover, employing theoretical frameworks from postcolonial epistemology and the anthropology of religion would enable scholars to trace the enduring influence of colonial modes of knowledge production on present-day religious and political identities.

In this light, the study demonstrates that the formation of Muslim identity in Punjab cannot be understood solely through political or institutional developments; it must be analyzed within the interwoven domains of religious discourse, intellectual response, and colonial epistemology. By linking census-based data to the evolving self-representations of Muslim actors, this research underscores the necessity of integrating empirical historical analysis with theoretical reflection. Ultimately, the Punjab experience illustrates that identity under colonial modernity was neither static nor merely imposed—it was a dynamic process negotiated through the dialectic of classification and self-articulation, a process that continues to inform the socio-religious landscape of South Asia today. In this regard, the study provides an original contribution to understanding how Muslim identity was negotiated under colonial rule, as evidenced by the Punjab census data between 1881 and 1931, which illustrate the institutionalization of sectarian and occupational distinctions and the interplay between state classification and indigenous reformist responses.

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